

Any Hope for Lessons Learned?

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

Journalists, researchers, historians have all pored over the events, the numbers, the horrors, the reasons and the results of the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and its re-cutting in 1971. So many of us have read, and interviewed and studied and listened, and feel we know what happened, that we understand.

But there is a different type of understanding, a jolting, suddenly clarifying picture that can show us a glimpse of the human heart, that can explain "why" on an individual level, providing a new angle to a story so many times told. And that different type of understanding can often be derived from literature.

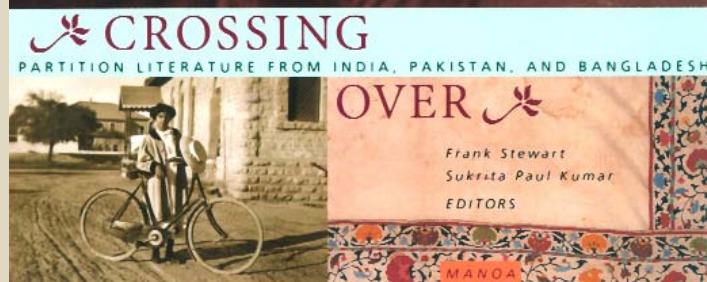
That's what's been accomplished by the 2007 publication and 2008 reprinting of *Crossing Over*, a collection of partition literature from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, much of it never translated before, or not readily available to English-speaking readers.

These short stories and chapters from novels are told from almost every possible perspective, from the maniac to the well-to-do survivor, the rape victim to the killer, the child to the cold-hearted soldier. Clearly, most of these tales don't have happy endings. More than one ends without any repentance or comfort. The depths of human depravity are here, the wonder of survival, the miracle of love, the banality of memory, the guilt of betrayal, the despair of unquenchable sorrow and loss.

But the motto of the original publishers, the University of Hawaii bi-annual *Mānoa* journal of international writing, seems to be that where there is understanding, there is hope. That's also why the U.S. Embassy participated in the launch of that special issue of the journal in August 2007 in New Delhi. Now, with additional photos and texts, and at a more affordable price, the South Asian edition has just been launched by the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi under the State Department's Indo-American Cooperative Publishing Program.

The selection and presentation of the literary pieces aims at depicting "emotions and responses of ordinary people caught in a tragic turning point in history, when tolerance, respect and compassion broke down," say the editors, Frank Stewart and Sukrita Paul Kumar. Almost journalistically, they say the works are not meant to offer solutions or assign blame.

Is that possible for the reader? Most of the pieces stir up strong emotions. I felt myself growing angrier and angrier, filled with disgust, as I read Saadat Hasan Manto's *The Dog of Tetwal*. Grasping for a good guy-bad guy



Crossing Over

Partition Literature from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh

Edited by Frank Stewart and Sukrita Paul Kumar

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scenario, I balanced each inhumanity and each kindness displayed by the characters, glimpsed my own prejudices, and read on with dread. There was no good guy. And I learned something about my own mind and heart, too.

Then, what to make of one's feelings in reading Bhisham Sahni's horror story, *The Train Has Reached Amritsar*? No, it's not *that* horror. It's the disastrous horror of a mother's love. A barbarity committed out of joy. One cannot read it unmoved.

Sahni looks at love again in *Pali*. Love from so many people, selfless, disinterested love. But it brings about no understanding, counteracts no prejudice, and intensifies, rather than eases, the national and religious and cultural divide.

"I love peace, I hate war. But I love that war, as much as I love peace, that is fought for freedom, for honor, for the survival of one's country," says the protagonist in Khadija Mastur's *Cool, Sweet Water*. We all know that the folks on the other side, in most conflicts, feel the same. Perhaps, through these works of literature and others, we will be able to understand it, too.



For more information:

Mānoa Journal

<http://www.hawaii.edu/mjournal/>

Indo-American Cooperative Publishing Catalogue

<http://americanlibrary.in.library.net/>